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ABSTRACT

College radio is quite often viewed as the true alternative to commercial radio. However, what is alternative radio and how does college radio factor into the ideal? To further understand this concept, this paper focuses on the role of alternative programming in college radio. Areas discussed include alternative radio as a non-mainstream form of expression; alternative music and freedom of expression; programming, censorship, and alternative radio; the relationship between the music industry and college radio; and the future of alternative radio. (Contains 32 references.) (Author/CR)

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THE ROLE OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMMING IN COLLEGE RADIO

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The Role of Alternative Programming in College Radio

Abstract

College radio is quite often viewed as the true alternative to commercial radio. But what is alternative radio and how does college radio factor into this ideal? To further understand this concept, this paper focuses on the role of alternative programming in college radio. Areas discussed include alternative radio as a non-mainstream form of expression; alternative music and freedom of expression; programming, censorship, and alternative radio; the relationship between the music industry and college radio; and the future of alternative radio.

The Role of Alternative Programming in College Radio

"... [N]early all [college and university radio] stations see their primary function as one of providing alternative programming to their listening audiences. ... More specifically, the alternative programming is primarily made up of three types: entertainment, information, and instruction" (Caton, 1979, p. 9). "College radio is as varied as college towns or college students" (Pareles, 1987, p. 18). Some stations mirror commercial radio, while others opt to develop their own style.

> Geography also helps determine a college station's format. A college station in rural Indiana might be the only station on the entire dial supporting the Foo Fighters, but if a college station based in Chicago plays the same band, it is likely playing the same music as five other commercial stations. (Marcus, 1997, p. 27)

The programming of alternative music, generally considered the focus of alternative programming, can have a negative impact as well. As Thompsen indicated in 1992:

> ...it can detract from the educational experience of students by encouraging them to focus on the sources of programming, rather than on the audiences for programming. ... The philosophy is, by design, diametrically opposed to the prevalent philosophy of nearly every commercial radio (and television) station. (p. 13)

In reality, the entire concept of providing "alternative music" to a college audience can be questioned as to the penetration of the college demographic itself. Kevin Zimmerman, wrote in 1989 that "more high schoolers actually listen to alternative music than college students" (p. 67.) And so, it is postulated that while alternative rock bands are popular on college radio stations, the college students themselves listen

more to mainstream radio. "Some program directors argue that college stations with mainstream formats better prepare broadcasting students for careers in commercial radio. Others cite the nature of the audience" (Kruse, 1995, 42-44; 157-159). (A case study focusing on alternative music, particularly in conjunction with community and college radio, is presented in a dissertation written in 1995 by Holly Cecelia Kruse. Entitled Marginal Formations and the Production of Culture: The Case of College Music, the work highlights three locations: Athens, Georgia; San Francisco, California; and Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. Additionally, the work provides a good historical perspective concerning college radio.)

> When looking at how college radio fits into both the overall radio market and specific local markets, it is tempting to conceptualize college radio as a monolithic medium. This temptation that should be avoided, however, because not all college radio stations follow alternative music formats, and college radio is not the only form of radio that programs alternative music. (Kruse, 1995, 42-44; 157-159)

Little was it anticipated that the noncommercial FM "band" (87.9-91.9 MHz) would evolve into what it is today. "In the later 70's and early 80's, bands like R.E.M., U2 and Talking Heads first established themselves on the underground circuit before eventually reaching an audience of millions" (Schoemer, 1992, p. 26). This underground programming was presented on college radio.

> Back in the '70s it would probably had been rebellious playing a Black Sabbath record or maybe the Sex Pistols. These days it's going to be something like the Butthole Surfers. The line keeps getting moved further and further to the left. Certainly to someone not really involved in it, it could seem like "it's much more out there now than it was." But, in a historical context and in taking things as

> they relate to each other, it's just as outrageous to play a Black Sabbath record in 1970 as it is to play the Sex Pistols in 1976 as it is to play the Butthole Surfers today. It still achieves the same effect. (G. Gimarc, author of Punk Diary: 1970-1979, March 8, 1995)

When did the alternative music "thing" really take off? In 1994, Cheryl Botchick, an associate editor at the College Music Journal New Music Report said that "[t]en years ago, college radio existed in kind of a bubble. ... Then came Jane's Addiction, Nirvana, Lollapalooza, Pearl Jam, and the lucrative marketing of alternative music" (Knopper, 1994, p. 84). Some record companies have gone so far to suggest "that college stations are 'wasting their signal' if they aren't playing alternative music" (Stark, 1993, p. 90).

Why has "alternative music" become so popular? It is projected that some 70% of all campus radio stations licensed to colleges and universities program some type of "alternative rock" (Wilkinson, 1994). Radio consultant and Pollack Media Group CEO Jeff Pollack said that "[p]eople are taking a rawer, tougher, more substantive approach to things in general, and there's a rejection of what's predictable and too slick" (Zimmerman, 1992, p. 66). This feeling has also thus produced talent like Soundgarden, Stone Temple Pilots, Tracy Chapman, Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians, Living Colour, Ziggy Marley, Dire Straits, the Police, the Cars, the Clash, Elvis Costello, 10,000 Maniacs, and Nine Inch Nails (who's Trent Reznor is known as Marilyn Mansons's mentor -- the "studiously abrasive-noise metal band"("The Usual Suspects," 1998, p. 44)). These are ones who became the commercially viable (now known) "mainstream" groups.

But alternative music is not just limited to rock music. In 1989, Gil Creel, Music Director of Tulane University's WTUL, New Orleans, told the audience at the College Music Journal's New Music Report's Music Marathon "that concentrating on 'the latest kick-ass hardcore or feedback [rock]' wasn't enough to be alternative, but that jazz, house music, hip-hop, and blues must also be represented" (Bessman & Stark, p. 12). Even "college-appropriate country music" should be exposed (Bessman, 1989, p. 52).

"College radio is a safety valve in the sanity of the music world" (G. Gimarc, personal communication, March 8, 1995). This is where new talent is born and discovered. "Today, college radio is all-important. It's the breeding ground for the new talent ... [and] it's also the lifeblood of the independent record industry" (Ward, 1988, p. 47). By the mid-80's, it was discovered that college radio could break new groups in such genres as country/punk fusion, the 60s sound, and punk rock. "College radio stations -- greenhouses for cutting-edge rock 'n' roll -- nurture new bands that often become mainstream hits a few months later" (Stearns, 1986, p. D4). Thus, "[a]t a time when many new artists face difficulty breaking through at commercial radio, college radio has grown into a virtual industry within an industry[]" (Starr, 1991, p. 30). Major music industry trade magazines, such as Gavin, now cover college radio playlists, along with the mainstream music. "The major record companies view format-free college stations that play alternative music as rock's minor league, the training ground for future U2s and

Depech Modes" (Mundy, 1993, p. 70). Additionally, the college students playing the music tend to appreciate it more than mainstream djs. "Says singer Tanya Donelly, who's often interviewed by campus deejays. 'They're more educated and excited about the music.'" (Mundy, 1993, p. 70). This leads to the social implication of discovering new talent! "College radio is garnering new respect and clout as a launching pad for undiscovered, and under-appreciated, talent" (Gundersen, 1989, p. 5D). New talent, alternative music, and college radio are being desired more and more (Mayhew, 1994).

College Radio and the Music Industry

And, college radio has made an impact and the music industry has discovered college radio! (See Holterman, The relationship between record companies and college music directors: A descriptive study of alternative radio, 1992.) The In 1992, Schoemer wrote:

> The music industry at large has looked for ways to exploit college radio as a market at least since the mid-80's, when bands like R.E.M. and U2 crossed over from a base of college-radio fans to mainstream commercial success. But this year [1992], with the multi-platinum sales of albums by Nirvana (more than 4 million copies), Pearl Jam (over 3 million copies), Red Hot Chili Peppers (3 million) and others, the game has changed considerably. College radio has been a business for several years; now, it's serious business. (p. C27)

The music industry is turning to "college radio as a kind of early warning system, identifying bands that may reach mainstream audiences an album or two in the future" (Pareles, 1987, p. 18). "Major labels access college radio most directly through

alternative music promotion departments which began springing up at majors during the eighties and which exist almost exclusively to get records played on college radio (and, to a lesser extent, commercial alternative radio stations)" (Kruse, 1995, 42-44; 157-159).

Another issue is that of music publicity, including published charts, and recommendations from music industry representatives to formulate station playlists.

> One problem that arises when discussing college radio charts, playlists, and formats is the temptation to assume that formatting and programming according to the charts are bad; that they make college radio somehow less "authentic." For some, there is a rather distasteful politics associated with the sort of loosely-formatted college radio deemed by many to be authentic. (Kruse, 1995, pp. 42-44; 157-179)

As mentioned earlier, today, the major music industry trade magazines cover college radio playlists, along with the mainstream music.

> There are a number of trade papers that include a variety of charts, including Cash Box, Radio & Records, and Hits, but in the world of alternative rock and pop -- what I have been calling college music -- the most important charts are found in Billboard, Rockpool, and especially CMJ [CMJ debuted in 1979 as the College Media Journall and the Gavin Report. CMJ's charts are the ones most watched by the industry; its figures are used in programming college radio stations and stocking retail stores. (Kruse, 1995, pp. 183-193)

Playlists supply the needed information to find out what's happening in the music world. "Chart information [is] especially useful in promoting records to college radio; charts are a sort of shorthand record labels can use to describe a record's success or potential success to music directors" (Kruse, 1995, pp. 183-193).

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Of course, along with the charts, come the music company representatives themselves. Music reps are the direct contact to music labels that produce and distribute music to radio stations. The aspects of promotion, public relations, and pressure from outside entities, particularly record promoters, can put a great deal of strain on the college radio station programmers. The station manager/faculty advisor needs to work closely with student programmers and station music directors to develop and nurture the relationship with record promoters. Words of wisdom need to be delivered to the student dealing with record reps to ensure that an understanding is promoted to foster a working relationship. The student must be cautious to determine the difference between recommendations and influence. (The university radio station in which the author managed, had an underlying policy of not accepting gifts, including meals, from record reps. Small items received in the mail unsolicited, such as desk ornaments, were acceptable. The only time that the student was allowed to socialize with record reps was at national record conventions.)

As for music licensing, the following is provided:

> Licensing organizations were created to solve the enormous problem of arranging the rights to every song individually and determining the royalty payments. The three current organizations which handle this task are BMI, ASCAP, and SESAC, Inc., a private, family-held company. … Each organization handles its licensing agreements differently. They each set their own licensing fees and terms of payment. (NACB, 1995, p. 166)

Concerning college radio stations and music licensing in particular:

> There are a ton of artists that are played on college radio and nowhere else. BMI is in the forefront of recognizing the contributions of college radio because it collects data from college radio. The implications are significant in at least two ways. First, most of the music industry sees that college stations play artists first. The licensing procedure can validate that assumption with a mathematical formula. Subsequently, the role of college stations in their minds of the managers, agents, venues, etc., will be more publicly known and appreciated. (NACB, 1995, p. 166)

It's Not Mainstream...It's Alternative...It's Expression

> If the 'Saturday Night Live' appearance [printed January 1992] was Nirvana's chance to prove to the unconverted that it was worthy of such honors [of being one of the most popular bands], the group failed miserably. But if its goal was to make an uncompromising display of the values of underground music, the achievement was unheralded. Nirvana didn't cater to the mainstream; it played the game on its own terms. (Schoemer, 1992, p. 26)

For those of us who saw the Nirvana television performance it was a message of expression. Here, the ultimate alternative, college-oriented group was captivating and cultivating the American culture with its performance. For them it was their time to express their true feelings. "Nirvana may not fit into the formulaic pigeonholes the industry usually carves for popular music. But for a whole generation of misfits, the members of Nirvana are nothing short of saviors" (Schoemer, 1992, p. 26). Coupled with Nirvana's appearance on MTV's "Unplugged," these performances were the true definition of the young culture and their feelings toward society. "Generation X" has realized that they might not be as successful as their parents. This phenomenon, if it becomes reality, will be a societal first in America. We have always strived for, been preached about, been told how we will always do better than our parents. But, it has

now become a possibility that this is not certain. And, the college generation, the younger generation, has realized this possibility. To other generations they appear to wander about. They appear mis-guided. In a way, it is almost an organized form of being hectic. You really don't know what's next, but you can sense the anger. And this form, then, is reflected in their music. And, in turn, it is reflected in the programming of college radio. (See Esselman, "Angry young women," USA Weekend, 1996.)

Alternative Music and Freedom of Expression

The ideals of expression and censorship must be considered within the discussion of alternative music and its relationship with college radio programming. From the outset, the ideal of free speech must be addressed.

> It is ironic that this paradigm of freedom does not extend to the electronic press. Content regulation of television and radio -- in the form of "safe harbor hours" and V-Chips and possibly even an A-Chip -- is, by extension, unconstitutional. …
>
> The pioneers of electronic media, including radio and television broadcasters (who have, after all, only been around a short 75 years) will have to make a stronger effort to protect their rights if First Amendment parity with the printed press is to be achieved. (Radio World, 1996 p. 5)

Programming, Censorship, and Alternative Radio

"From scholarly jazz programs to unusual classical repertory to crashing, howling post-punk hardcore rock, college radio (alongside a few listener-supported and community radio stations) supplies music heard nowhere else on the airwaves" (Pareles,

1987, p. 18). This type of programming, an actual service, is consistent with the fact that colleges and universities, as are commercial broadcasters, are licensed to "operate broadcast facilities in the public interest, convenience, and necessity" (Ozier, 1978, p. 34). Additionally, the on-going broadcasts provided by college radio help to serve as public relations arms for the schools themselves. Often college radio stations are the only outlets for such broadcasts as campus sports and news. In regard to the colleges' and universities' perceptions of college radio, one advantage is that the institutional image is enhanced every time a well-programmed station identifies itself as affiliated with the school (Sauls, 1995). This identification though can lead to potential problems, particularly in regards to music programming and censorship. Wolper, in 1990, clearly indicated this issue when he wrote that "[t]he licenses of campus radio stations are held by boards of trustees at universities and colleges. Those groups traditionally avoid arguments with the FCC" [Federal Communications Commission] (p. 54). Wolper cited the concern of Ken Fate, the student general manager of KUOI-FM, at the University of Idaho, in Moscow in regards to the FCC: "They are trying to censor us. ... They are making it criminal to play music. To read poetry on the air. To read literature" (p. 54).

> As the influence of college radio grows, however, so does its caution. [In 1987], the Federal Communications Commission issued a warning to KCSB-FM, a 10-watt college radio station in Santa Barbara, Calif., that it had committed "actionable indecency" by broadcasting the punk-rock song "Makin' Bacon" after 10 P.M. The warning was

> part of a broadening of the commission's restrictions on broadcast indecency. (Pareles, 1987, p. 18)

Indecency & Obscenity

Now entitled *"The Role of Expositional Obscenity in College Radio,"* Robert McKenzie wrote in his 1994 paper of the concerns detailing college radio in broadening broadcast language:

> I believe that college radio deejays have a very real understanding of obscenity issues because they expose the new language forms to their audiences and experience firsthand whether or not the audience is offended by their remarks. Moreover, because the ambiguous nature of the expositional obscenity in question engages the mental imagery of audience, the public reaction to the language is truer to FCC-actualized definition of obscenity--an expression that some group of people finds to be extremely offensive. Therefore, college radio performs a decidedly productive role in establishing the boundaries of acceptable broadcasting expressions, and in exposing its practitioners directly to the process by which symbols become obscene.

The practical applications discussed center around the actual dealings with these characteristics at the station. It is the intent that station managers and advisors can learn from the experience of others as suggestions are put forth.

From the outset, the issues of indecent and obscene programming should be made clear in the station policy manual. At this point, good judgement on behalf of the station leaders is paramount. Understanding the audience that you are programming to will help to determine the realm in which you operate. It is important to realize that different programming content is allowable or restrained depending upon the intended audience and time of the day (this is where the programming of indecent material to children comes into play).

The actual program idea or intent will play a role in determining how far one can go. For example, it was the author's experience that a prerecorded broadcast at the university radio station he managed dealt will the feelings of Vietnam War veterans. As one might imagine, some of the language in the program was very forceful and, by some estimates, could have been considered rude. Since the program dealt with issue of war and feelings exhibited by the veterans themselves, the language was appropriate. But, was it appropriate for broadcast? The manager was under the impression that the student program director was going to screen the program and edit it for language before the broadcast. In reality, the program director let the program run as originally recorded. Since it was broadcast on a Sunday afternoon, it was my concern, as manager, that we would possibly receive some listener complaints. As a precaution, a "memo to the file" was written detailing the intent of the program and the understanding that it was to be previewed for language. It was felt that this would provide adequate reference if needed, stating that the station management was aware of the broadcast.

A true distinction needs to be emphasized in that indecency and obscenity are to be judged by contemporary community standards. This is where local interpretation is brought into play. Just because a student broadcaster hears something on the radio in the big city, doesn't mean it is all right for broadcast in the small college town. And so, the idea of "what's that college station playing now" comes forth from the local citizens.

And just because your station has a lot of listeners, doesn't justify indecent and obscene programming.

Good judgement and managerial control at the station will help preclude problems in the arena of indecency and obscenity. Common sense helps a great deal, too! And, as is normally the case interpreting the law, ignorance is not an excuse.

What's the future of alternative radio?

As of September 1994, The M Street Journal reported that out of 11,565 operating stations, 370 were programming alternative rock as their primary format. Of these stations, 276 were noncommercial. Listed as the tenth most popular format out of 29, it is apparent that alternative rock is growing as a fundamental format (back cover). Thus, it can be projected that alternative music will continue to maintain, if not expand, its influence on college radio stations. Add to this that with "more than 1,100 college stations to appeal to, many bands just breaking into the music industry can be heard across the United States" (Allen, 1997, p. 13).

> You get a lot more confrontational radio in college radio. And, it's actually very healthy from two different standpoints. One is it gives an accurate reflection of that part of society which doesn't really get much exposure in the normal media. And the other part is, as broadcasters, these kids get to work it out of their systems for 4 years before they have to put on the suit and tie and be real people...real responsible broadcasters. (G. Gimarc, personal communication, March 8, 1995)

Some believe that "college radio is divided between innovation and complacency. Some insiders believe college radio

is still paving the way for new artists and new sounds" (Marcus, 1997, p. 26).

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